

## Football IS coming home!

On Sunday (11 July 2021) England will be playing Italy in the final of the Euros football tournament at Wembley Stadium. There is nowhere else in our country more appropriate for this historic match, but why is that?



1. Wembley Stadium and its new steps, April 2021. (Photo by Philip Grant)

One hundred years ago, when the [British Empire Exhibition](#) was being planned, the then Prince of Wales, who was President of its organising committee, wanted it to include ‘a *great national sports ground*’. His wish was granted, and the giant reinforced concrete Empire Stadium, with its iconic twin towers, was built in just 300 days. It hosted the FA Cup final in April 1923, and a year later its first England international football match, against Scotland (a 1-1 draw).



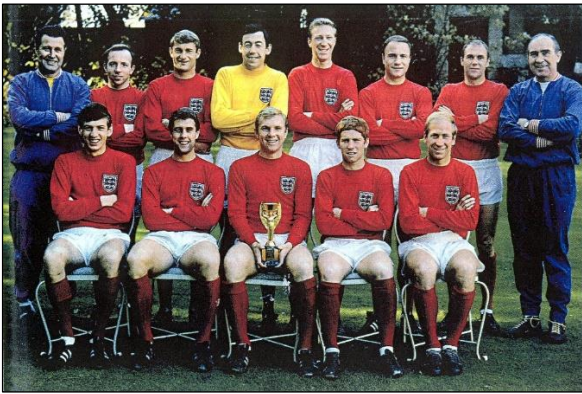
2. The Empire Stadium at Wembley in 1924. (Image from the Wembley History Society Colln. at Brent Archives)

The long-term future of the stadium was in doubt, until it was saved from demolition in 1927 by [Arthur Elvin](#). He ensured that annual events, like the FA Cup and Rugby League Challenge Cup finals were popular days out for spectators, as well as making the stadium pay its way with regular greyhound and speedway racing meetings. Although cup finals made the stadium famous in this country, the 1948 Olympic Games put Wembley on the world map. The Olympic football final at Wembley saw Sweden beating Yugoslavia 3-1, with Denmark taking the bronze medal after a 5-3 victory over Great Britain.



**3. An aerial view of Wembley Stadium during the 1937 FA Cup final.** (From a 1948 Wembley book)

It was 1951 before the stadium hosted a normal football international match against a country other than one of the home nations (Argentina). Then 1963 saw the European Cup final played at Wembley for the first time (AC Milan 2 – Benfica 1). The stadium was a key part of England's staging of the 1966 World Cup, including the final, where England beat West Germany 4-2 after extra time, to win their only major international tournament (so far).



**4. England's 1966 World Cup winning team.** (Image from a book, shared by a Wembley History Soc. member)

When Olympic Way was being pedestrianised in 1993, one of the [tile mural scenes](#) in the new subway from Wembley Park Station, celebrating Wembley's sports and entertainment heritage, was of England footballers at the twin towers stadium. The new structure was named the Bobby Moore Bridge, after England's 1966 winning captain who had recently died from cancer, and a plaque in his honour, at the centre of the mural, was unveiled by his widow. It should have been unthinkable for this mural to be hidden behind adverts during the 2021 Euros matches. Luckily, that threat was prevented by a campaign which lasted from [February](#) to [June](#)!



**5. The England footballers tile mural, in the Bobby Moore Bridge subway at Wembley Park.**



You will see that one of the two footballers portrayed is coloured. The artist is thought to have based this player on John Barnes, who played for England 79 times between 1983 and 1995. His family moved here from Jamaica when he was 12, and his talent was spotted by Watford when he was playing for Sudbury Court, in the Middlesex League, aged 17. All of England's 1966 team were white players, and John Barnes was only the seventh black footballer to represent England in modern times.

It was not until 1978 that Viv Anderson became England's first modern black player. That same year saw West Bromwich Albion field three black players, something which was so unusual for a top-flight club that they were nicknamed "The Three Degrees", after a popular female singing trio. Such was the racial prejudice at the time that they suffered terrible abuse from fans of other teams, and from other players. Worse still, this was considered "normal", and they just had to get on with it, and show that they were not intimidated, by playing even better!



**6. Cyrille Regis (left) showing off his England shirt, and Luther Blissett.** (Images from the internet)

One of the West Brom trio, who answered the abuse by scoring lots of goals, was Cyrille Regis. This former pupil of Harlesden's Cardinal Hinsley High School (now Newman Catholic College) played for England five times between 1982 and 1987, and was the country's third black footballer. The fifth was also a product of the Brent Schools football system, Luther Blissett, who went to Willesden High School (now Capital City Academy). During his long career with Watford, he played fourteen games for England between 1982 and 1984. Brent's diverse community, which also saw black Council Leaders by the 1980s, was helping to show the way!

Prejudice in football, and generally, was not just a racial problem. In the 1980s, Rachel Yankey was a girl at Malorees Primary School who wanted to play football. As an 8-year old, she shaved her hair, called herself Ray (her initials) and joined a boy's football team. She was so good that it was two years before they found out she wasn't a boy! At 16, she signed for Arsenal Ladies, and between 1997 and 2013 she played 129 matches for England (a record at the time for men or women).



**7. Rachel Yankey, playing for England (left), and for Team GB at the Olympics.** (Images from the internet)

None of Rachel's England internationals was played at Wembley Stadium, as it was not until November 2014 that it became a venue for "the Lionesses" home games. However, she did grace the Wembley pitch in one of her five games for Team GB at the 2012 Olympic Games, when they beat Brazil 1-0 in front of a crowd of 70,584.

The Bobby Moore Bridge subway, with its heritage tile murals, was created as part of preparations for the Euro 1996 football tournament. A local player who took part in that was Stuart Pearce from Kingsbury (Fryent Primary and Claremont High Schools). After leaving school at 16, to train as an electrician, he played non-League football for Wealdstone before transfers to Coventry City, then Nottingham Forest. A ferocious left-back, he won 78 England caps (nine of these as captain) between 1987 and 1999.



**8. Stuart Pearce screaming with joy after scoring his 1996 quarter-final penalty.** (Image from the internet)

One of the biggest disappointments of his career was when he missed a penalty in the semi-final shoot-out against West Germany at the World Cup in 1990. You can see the emotion on his face after he scored a penalty in the quarter-final shoot-out against Spain at Euro 1996, a feat he repeated at Wembley in the semi-final against Germany. Unfortunately, it was his teammate, Gareth Southgate, whose penalty miss saw England fail to reach the final.

The original 1923 stadium was looking very old in 1996, and it was decided that a new national stadium was needed. Despite strong bids for it to be built away from London, the fact that [Wembley was felt to be the home of English football](#) swung the decision our way. The old "twin towers" were finally demolished early in 2003, although we still have a small relic of it. The concrete base of a flag pole, from the top of one of the towers, was donated to the borough by Wembley National Stadium Ltd, and can be seen in Brent River Park.



**9. The flag pole base from a Wembley twin tower in Brent River Park, St Raphael's.** (Photo by Philip Grant)

The new Wembley Stadium opened in 2007, with that year's FA Cup final as one of its first games. Soon afterwards there was a road sign in Honeypot Lane (I wish I'd taken a photo of it) with an image of the stadium arch, welcoming drivers to "Brent – the home of Wembley". I do have a photo showing the stadium in May 2011, ready for the UEFA Champions League final between Barcelona and Manchester United. (Whatever happened to Brent's planning policy to protect views of the stadium, such as this one from Bridge Road!)



**10. The new Wembley Stadium, with its arch, seen along Olympic Way in May 2011.** (Photo by Philip Grant)

"Football's coming home" was England's theme song for Euro 1996, and 25 years later it is being sung again. Wembley is staging some of the main matches in the delayed Euro 2020 tournament, and England, with Gareth Southgate as manager, have at last reached the final of a major tournament (for the first time since 1966)! This time, the England squad (and many of the other teams taking part) is much more representative of the country's diverse population.

Once again, there is a "boy from Brent" playing an important part in the team's success. Raheem Sterling went to Oakington Manor Primary and Copland Community (now Ark Elvin Academy) schools, and could see the arch of the new stadium from his Neasden home. He played his first England senior game just before his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2012, and has been a regular team member since 2014, earning 67 caps so far. He has already scored 3 goals in the current Euros tournament, and helped with some of England captain Harry Kane's 4 goals.



**11. Harry Kane and Raheem Sterling embracing, after one of their goals.** (Image from the internet)

Their togetherness, and that of the England squad as a whole, is a testament to the character of their manager, Gareth Southgate. Mutual respect, fairness and equality is something that he



shows by example. Whereas in the past players might have been punished or excluded for expressing their views, such as Raheem on racism or his team-mate Marcus Rashford on food poverty, Southgate has supported them. Trust in their manager is part of the reason for England's success.

A change in attitude towards racial prejudice has come about in English football since the 1980s. There are still some idiots who think it's acceptable to boo players taking the knee, abuse them on social media, or to sing anti-semitic chants, while claiming to be England supporters. Thankfully they are now a tiny minority.



12. UEFA's Equal Game logo for the Euros. (Image from the internet)

More recently this change has been reflected in UEFA. Their Respect and EqualGame campaigns are promoting inclusion in football, whatever anyone's race, religion, sexuality, or ability. It is all about the benefits of diversity, something that Brent can show them through our everyday lives and experience. Football has come home, to the right place!

**Philip Grant, 9 July 2021.**